

Chapter Seven

Neighborhood Revitalization & Historic Resources

Existing Conditions

Two general types of development characterize the City of Westminster. In the older parts of the City, development is denser, offering a mixture of residential, commercial, and civic uses. On the outskirts of the City, development is less dense and is typified by the segregation of land uses characteristic of suburban communities, so that residential and commercial uses are geographically separated. This chapter focuses on the older, more densely developed areas that encompass the core historic area of Westminster.

The streets in the older part of Westminster generally follow a traditional grid pattern with a combination of primary streets and secondary service alleys. Buildings have been constructed close together and at the edge of the sidewalk, particularly in the downtown business district of Westminster. This arrangement encourages pedestrian activity because businesses are easily reached by walking, and the narrow appearance of the streetscape encourages vehicles to travel more slowly.

Within the residential neighborhoods that border the historic core, more space has been provided between individual buildings. These older suburban neighborhoods fit in well with the historic fabric of the downtown because in most cases, these areas feature small front yards, narrow streets, sidewalks, and service alleys. Many of these residential neighborhoods are within walking distance to the retail shops and services available in Westminster's downtown. Some of these neighborhoods have gained historic value in their own right as examples of early suburban development patterns and their adaptation to local vernacular influences.

Architecture in Westminster often reflects a combination of vernacular and national styles. In many cases, the form of the building was based on the vernacular farmhouse with detailing that represented certain elements of high style architecture. At times, a well-to-do farmer would construct very similar houses on both his agricultural land and in town. Particularly in the oldest parts of Westminster, there was a considerable time lag between styles that were popular nationally and the styles being constructed locally.

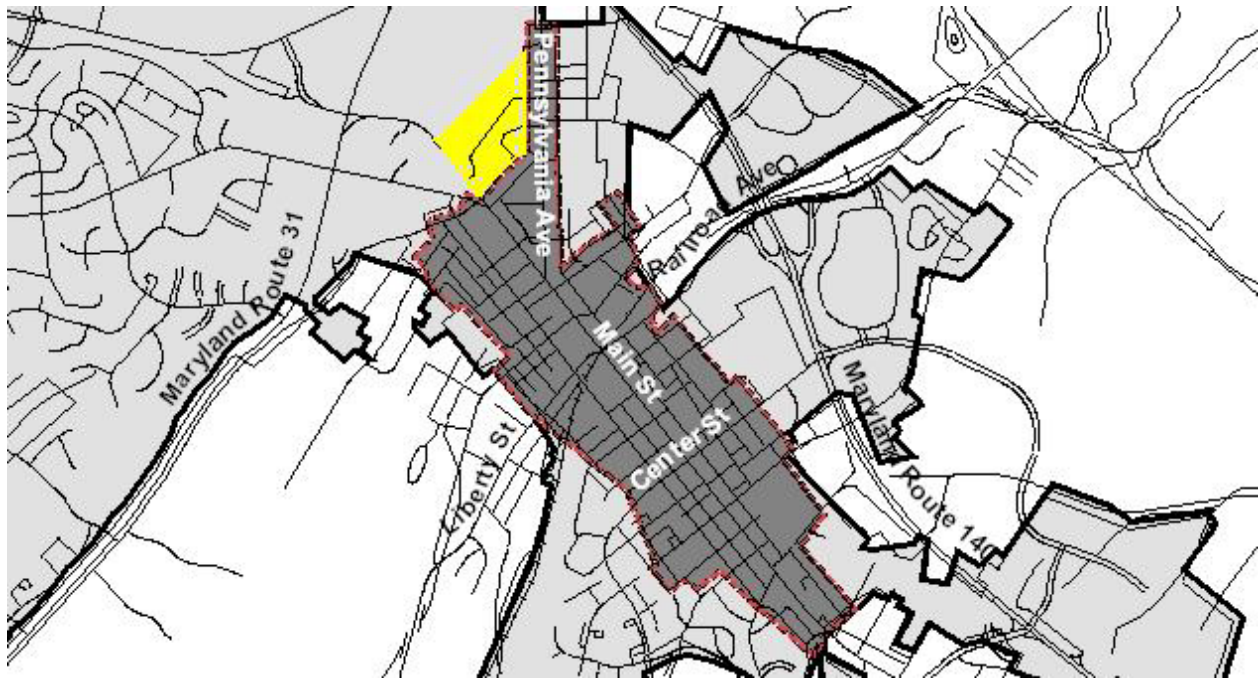
The City of Westminster National Register District, created in 1980, encompasses much of the older part of town and includes buildings that were constructed from the late 1700s and onward. The National Register District Map (Map 7.1) outlines the boundaries of this federally recognized district. The oldest structures in Westminster are generally located in the eastern portion of the City, where the original land parcels were platted. The town gradually expanded westward along the

present day Main Street, with latter residential neighborhoods built on the outskirts. Over time, many of the older neighborhoods have experienced new construction on infill parcels that is not always compatible with the historic character of the town. According to the inventory form completed for nomination to the National Register, at least 89% of the structures located within the Westminster National Register District were considered to be historically contributing to the District in 1980. This percentage has likely decreased due to alterations and demolitions in the twenty-five years since the establishment of the District. A resurvey of the District would provide an accurate assessment of the current condition of the City's National Register District.

A second National Register District found within the Westminster corporate limits is located on the McDaniel College campus. This National Register District incorporates several of the oldest buildings on the southeast portion of the campus.

In addition to the National Register Districts located in Westminster, there is also a Local Historic District. The primary distinction between the national and local districts is that the National Register District is primarily an honorary recognition and only provides protection to buildings if a project involves federal funding. The local district is part of the City's Zoning Ordinance and establishes a set of design guidelines that must be followed for any exterior renovations or additions that are made to a property located within the local district. These design guidelines are based on the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. Currently, properties are designated for inclusion in the Local Historic District on a voluntary basis. At this time two properties are located within the district. As a result, most of Westminster's historic resources are not protected by government regulation.

The Local Historic District is administered by the Westminster Historic District Commission, a five-member commission of citizens having a background or special interest in preservation issues. The Historic District Commission has focused its efforts on educational programs through the sponsoring of workshops and house tours, as well as encouraging historically sensitive rehabilitation through the administration of two rehabilitation tax credits.

Map 7.1. City of Westminster National Register District

City Boundary

National Register District

McDaniel College NRD

Map prepared by the City of Westminster Department of Planning and Public Works. This map is for illustrative purposes only. Official determinations of eligibility for tax credits is made by the administering agency upon application submittal.

In historic neighborhoods, maintenance of buildings is often an issue. Aging structures usually require a higher level of maintenance than new buildings. While many neighborhoods in Westminster are in good condition, there are some general areas and specific properties that have not been properly maintained. This lack of maintenance degrades the integrity of the structure, reduces property values, and can give the impression that an overall neighborhood is in decline. The Mayor and Common Council of Westminster recently extended the provisions of the City's Property Maintenance Code to the exteriors of owner occupied properties in an effort to eliminate these negative impacts. In addition, the City offers a variety of programs to encourage the maintenance and rehabilitation of the City's historic structures.

Revitalization Programs

There are a number of programs available that provide for the revitalization of historic neighborhoods in Westminster. These programs include a Community Development Block Grant Program, a Rehabilitation Assistance Loan Fund, a Main Street Improvement Program, 'Standards for Renovations' guidelines, rehabilitation tax incentives, and a façade improvement program.

The City of Westminster has participated for over 15 years in the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program. The City is currently eligible to compete for federal funding under the State of Maryland's CDBG Program. Funding is available for housing, infrastructure, economic development, and related activities. The specific area addressed by the City varies for each grant application.

Another program is the Rehabilitation Assistance Loan Fund, which provides loans for improvements in downtown Westminster. While normally used for facade improvements on downtown commercial buildings, particularly along Main Street, the revolving loan fund is also available for rental housing rehabilitation and the creation of additional housing units for low-income people.

Westminster's designation as a Maryland Main Street Community makes available a variety of technical assistance from private and State agencies. The City's Office of Economic Development offers a Façade Improvement Program that provides grants for exterior renovations of buildings in the downtown areas of the City. The Office of Housing and Community Development has also administered a number of State grants to revitalize Main Street in Westminster.

Architectural design guidelines, known as 'Standards for Renovations,' were initially adopted in 1978 and currently apply to the portion of Main Street zoned Central Business, generally located between Anchor Street and Longwell Avenue. During 1997, a committee reviewed and updated this uniform set of standards to which developers and property owners must comply when constructing or renovating buildings in this portion of downtown Westminster. The purpose of the guidelines is to maintain the historic appearance of downtown Westminster, which is a significant draw for both regular customers and visitors to the area. Projects are currently reviewed for compliance with the design guidelines by staff.

Another revitalization program currently available to Westminster residents is the rehabilitation tax incentive program. Local, state and federal programs are in place. When combined, these tax incentives provide a significant financial incentive to rehabilitate historic structures within the City.

The City offers several tax credits for historically sensitive rehabilitation and construction on qualified properties within the corporate limits. A property is eligible for the tax credits if it is located within the City's Historic District Zone, or listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places, or identified as a contributing property located within the City's National Register District. One credit returns 10% of the qualified expenses for the restoration and preservation of an

eligible historic property, applied to the local real property tax liability of the property, or 5% of the qualified expenses for the construction of an architecturally compatible new structure on an eligible historic property. Another credit offers the difference between the local real property tax, but for the tax credit, that would be payable on the assessed value of an eligible historic property after the completion of eligible work, and the local real property tax that would be payable on the assessed value of the property if the eligible work was not done, for a period of 10 years. Often, the value of the 10% tax credit exceeds the five-year tax liability of the property owner. The possibility of extending the City's local property tax incentive program to include County taxes should be further studied.

The State Income Tax Credit program began on January 1, 1997, and is available to owner-occupied residential properties and income producing properties located in a National Register District or a Local Historic District. Under the program, the property owner can receive an income tax credit equal to 20% of the cost of rehabilitation work. Expenditures for rehabilitation work over a 24-month period must be at least \$5,000 for owner-occupied residences. For income producing properties the minimum is the adjusted basis of the structure or \$5,000, whichever is greater. If the amount of the tax credit is greater than the total income tax owed during the first year in which the credit is claimed, the excess credit is transferred to the owner as a tax rebate in the year the project is completed. The application process for the State Income Tax Credit program includes two steps. First, a structure must be designated as a Certified Heritage Structure. Second, the rehabilitation project(s) must be approved by the Maryland Historical Trust, which requires conformance with the Trust's guidelines.

The Federal Income Tax Incentive consists of a 20% tax credit. This credit is available only to income producing properties that are part of a National Register District and for which renovations conform to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. The tax credit can be carried back for one tax year and carried forward for up to 20 years. Expenditures for rehabilitation work over a 24-month period must at least match the adjusted basis of a structure or \$5,000, whichever is greater. In order to expedite the processing of applications, property owners who are applying for both State and Federal Income Tax Credits are required to submit only the federal application forms and the cover sheets of the state application.

Persons interested in pursuing these opportunities should check with their tax or financial advisor as requirements may periodically change.

Community Facilities Impacts

In addition to the programs that are available to property owners to assist with the rehabilitation of historic structures, the City provides a number of community projects that help to maintain the overall quality of its neighborhoods and encourage private investment in the City.

Of prime importance is the public water and sewer system. Public water and sewer service is provided throughout the City of Westminster. Each year, upgrades to the system are incorporated into the Capital Improvements Program (CIP) in order to maintain the overall system in good condition. In particular, the historic neighborhoods of Westminster have been sites of water main

replacements. This type of work is coordinated with road reconstruction projects when possible to limit the impact of construction work. Such investments on the part of the City demonstrate the desire to maintain the condition of neighborhoods and revitalize Westminster.

Another way in which the City enhances its neighborhoods is through the local park system. Most residences and businesses are located within walking distance of one or more City parks, which offer recreation opportunities for children and adults and provide open space within neighborhoods. The parks serve as an amenity that enhances the quality of life and desirability of Westminster's historic neighborhoods.

A final facilities project which has served to preserve and enhance Westminster's historic neighborhoods has been the compatible reconstruction of the State highways which pass through the National Register District. When East Main Street was reconstructed in 1993-94, the original plans were changed radically to avoid widening the street and to protect the traditional character of Main Street. In addition, brick sidewalks and crosswalks were added, trees and planting beds installed, and on-street parking maintained. This project resulted in preservation of the historic layout and appearance of the street. The East Main Street reconstruction project was recognized by two federal agencies during 1997. First, the project was included as a model in the National Trust publication *Smart States, Better Communities*. In addition, the project received an Environmental Excellence Award for Excellence in Historic and Archeological Preservation from the Federal Highway Administration. The reconstructions of West Main Street and Pennsylvania Avenue were modeled after the East Main Street project due to its success. Moreover, the public improvements made to East Main Street have encouraged private investment in the adjoining properties.

Impact of Development Regulations on Historic Resources

Current subdivision regulations do not provide any specific protection to historic resources in Westminster. In many cases historic homes are now surrounded by new residential development. Although these structures have been preserved, they have lost integrity due to the close proximity of the new development. Subdivision regulations could be amended to ensure the protection of historic structures when a development occurs. Careful consideration would need to be given to maintaining the integrity of historic properties by providing an adequately sized lot. This would allow a portion of the surrounding landscape to be retained and protect the historic structure from visual intrusions of new development.

In the event that a historically valuable structure is scheduled to be demolished in the National Register District, the property owner is required to meet with staff and the Historic District Commission to discuss alternative uses and site design that could save the structure. If the owner elects to proceed with demolition, he or she is required to submit an archiving report. The report contains a written component describing the historic value, history, and notable features of the structure, as well as a graphic component that includes floor plan drawings and photographs.

In addition, the Standards for Renovation provide protection by requiring a review of renovations proposed for structures in the downtown central business area. Similar protection of historic structures could be provided throughout the City by expanding the Local Historic District.

Goals and Objectives

Based on the information provided in this chapter, the following goals and objectives have been developed for Neighborhood Revitalization and Historic Resources. Recommended actions to achieve these goals and objectives are located in the conclusion of the plan.

Goal 1: Require that all buildings and properties in Westminster are properly maintained.

Objectives and recommended actions:

1. Inform property owners about the availability of local, state, and federal programs for the improvement of property.
 - a. Develop informational materials about property improvement programs, and distribute materials directly to property owners.
 - b. Sponsor information sessions and workshops regarding programs for the improvement of property.
2. Promote tax incentives programs for the rehabilitation of historic properties.
 - a. Continue to offer and refine local incentive programs for rehabilitation projects.
 - b. Continue to distribute information about the tax credits to new owners of historic properties in Westminster.
 - c. Sponsor information sessions regarding tax incentive programs.
 - d. Study the feasibility of extending the tax credit to County tax liability.
3. Consider use of the City's ability to secure or improve uninhabitable abandoned structures with significant historic value, rather than allowing these structures to be demolished.
 - a. Monitor the condition and occupancy of "at-risk" buildings with significant historic value.
 - b. Develop public-private partnerships as appropriate in order to preserve important structures

Goal 2: Encourage the preservation of historic resources.

Objectives and recommended actions:

1. Educate property owners regarding the architectural and historical significance of their properties.
 - a. Organize workshops regarding the history and architecture of Westminster.
 - b. Support the coordination of historical house and business tours.
2. Maintain an accurate assessment of the condition of Westminster's historic fabric.
 - a. Re-survey the City's National Register District and state-listed properties, noting alterations, demolitions to historic properties not presently included in the District.
 - b. Submit applications for historically valuable properties not presently in the National Register District for consideration of inclusion in both state and federal registries by the Maryland Historical Trust.
 - c. Consider the development of a 'preservation plan' for Westminster that would focus the interpretation of historic fabric within the City.
3. Protect historic resources during development and renovation projects.
 - a. Revise development regulations to require that the protection of historic resources be evaluated during the review process.
 - b. Market the benefits of the Local Historic District to property owners.
 - c. Ensure that historically valuable structures scheduled to be demolished are archived in accordance with the standards prescribed by the City.